



RESEARCH for *ACTION*

Time to Engage?

Civic Participation in Philadelphia's School Reform

September 2005

A research brief from the *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* project

Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform

Research for Action (RFA) is leading *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a comprehensive, four-year study of Philadelphia's complex and radical school reform effort. RFA researchers are working with colleagues from the University of Pennsylvania, Montclair State University, Swarthmore College, and the Consortium on Chicago School Research to examine the impact of state takeover, the efficacy of a diverse provider model, the success of district-level leadership in managing a complex set of reforms, the engagement of civic and community groups with district policy and school improvement, and the key factors influencing student outcomes under various school conditions and school management models.

Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform includes a multi-faceted, vigorous public awareness component that engages leaders and citizens in the process of educational change, and informs and guides the national debate on school reform. The project disseminates information broadly through public speaking, the RFA website, and reports, research briefs, and journal articles featuring clear, timely, and credible analysis of the real impact of school improvement efforts.

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Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

Research for Action is funded through grants from foundations and contracts for services from a range of organizations, including the School District of Philadelphia. For more information about RFA please go to our website, www.researchforaction.org.

Mission Statement

Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

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A Research Brief

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Introduction

Philadelphia is at the forefront of a national trend towards privatization in education, making school reform in Philadelphia a topic of national and local consequence. In December 2001, after years of conflict between city and state over educational funding, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took over the School District of Philadelphia, declaring the city's schools to be in a state of academic and fiscal crisis. In the months following the takeover, the newly formed School Reform Commission ushered in an unprecedented level of educational privatization by turning dozens of schools over

to private (for-profit and non-profit) educational management organizations (EMOs). While Philadelphia is currently unique in the number of schools under private management, this distinction may be short lived. In 2002, the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation created a fresh sense of urgency about school reform among educators and policymakers in Philadelphia and across the country. As the mandates and sanctions of NCLB go into effect, other states and districts are likely to opt for the sorts of "strong" interventions (including outsourcing of school management) required by the legislation.¹ As a result, cities around the country are watching Philadelphia as a test case of what may well be the future of urban school reform: the use of privatization and outsourcing as educational remedy.

Since the state takeover, the Philadelphia school district has created a new governance model, in which for-profits, non-profits, and universities receive contracts to manage schools.² Further, these and other organizations also receive contracts to provide a range of additional services.³ The shift to a public/private institutional structure, coupled with the urgency surrounding urban school reform, together shape civic and community

engagement in decisions affecting public education. Our investigation contributes to research that has established the importance of "civic capacity"—defined as broad-based engagement of civic and community groups in identifying and pursuing an agenda for school improvement—to urban school reform.⁴ The literature on civic capacity has focused on political and economic dynamics at the city-wide level. We focus on the structure of school district governance as an important aspect of the context influencing civic capacity.

Although "participation through contracts" has encouraged district staff to reach out to a range of local organizations to increase resources and support for the city's schools, contracting appears to have implications for the roles of civic actors in Philadelphia. In this brief, we focus specifically on neighborhood-based organizations and advocacy groups with limited resources. Contractual relationships may be making it difficult for these groups—so often important voices for equity and sustainability in the city—to take an independent stance from the school district. In addition, we argue that the sense of urgency fostered by both the state takeover and NCLB promotes a rapid reform pace, which, in turn, can eclipse meaningful citizen engagement.

Research for Action has had a long-standing interest in the role of the "public" in school reform. We have analyzed the strengths and limitations of civic, parent, and community engagement during previous Philadelphia reform initiatives. Specifically, we have found that, while the rhetoric of the previous school reform effort provided an opening for some groups to engage with the district in a meaningful way, there was a lack of consensus among local civic actors around the strategies for reform. This lack of consensus had a negative impact on school reform in Philadelphia during the 1990s, undermining its efficacy and sustainability [see box on page 4 for key findings].⁵ However, our research also showed the important role of strong inter-

¹Brady, R. C. (2003). *Can failing schools be fixed?* Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

²For a description of the governance model developing in Philadelphia, see Christman, J. B., Gold, E. & Herold, B. (forthcoming). *Blurring the boundaries: Private sector involvement in Philadelphia school reform* [Research Brief]. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

³Contracting, especially with civic groups and grassroots leaders, is a practice that the current CEO, Paul Vallas, also followed in Chicago.

⁴Stone, C. N. (2005, January). Looking back to look forward. *Urban Affairs Review*, 40 (3), 309-341.

Stone, C. N. (2005). Civic capacity: What, why, and from whence? In S. Fuhrman and M. Lazerson (Eds.). *Institutions of democracy: The public schools*. New York: Oxford University Press. Stone, C. N. (n.d.). Thoughts about civic capacity. Stone, C. N., Henig, J.R., Jones, B.D., & Pierannunzi, C. (2001). *Building civic capacity: The politics of reforming urban schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

⁵Christman, J. B. and Rhodes A. (2002). *Civic Engagement and Urban School Improvement: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

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mediary groups as facilitators of parent and community participation, which is crucial to surfacing and addressing issues related to educational equity.⁶ Finally, our research nationally on the role of intermediaries echoes what we found in Philadelphia. For example, we found that grassroots and community groups across the United States were able to organize parents and communities to effectively promote change and overcome such “persistent obstacles to reform” as “ever-changing system priorities, competing political interests, and resource inequities.”⁷

We draw on our historical knowledge of both Philadelphia and civic engagement to raise questions about the trade-offs that have been made within the new district context between rapid change and sustainability and between civic peace and substantive broad-based dialogue and engagement. As the district moves further from the “crisis” of the state takeover, we suggest that the time has come to re-focus on civic engagement in public education.

⁶Gold, E., Rhodes, A, Brown, S., Lytle, S. & Waff, D. (2001). Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

⁷Gold, E. & Simon, E. (2004, January 14). Public accountability: School Improvement efforts need the active involvement of communities to succeed. *Education Week*, 23 (11).

Privatization in Education

In recent years, market-model strategies have increasingly been touted as solutions for lackluster performance by public-sector bureaucracies. The federal government, states, and municipalities around the country have experimented with privatization, using the private sector to fill public functions. At the same time, corporate interests have identified the public sector as a market ripe for their products and services. Although contracting is not new in education, the contracting out of public-school management has been relatively rare until recently. Now private for- and non-profit organizations are providing services not only at the margins of education—such as food services or transportation, but also at the core of the educational enterprise—ranging from school management to curriculum design to professional development.⁸

In Philadelphia, privatization began on a grand scale with the state takeover of the schools and the subsequent replacement of the school board with a five-member School Reform Commission (SRC), appointed by the governor and the

Although contracting is not new in education, the contracting out of public-school management has been relatively rare until recently.

⁸Richards, C.E., Shore, R., & Sawicky, M.B. (1996). *Risky business: Private management of public schools*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Lessons from Philadelphia about Building Civic Capacity for School Reform

The following are 5 key lessons gleaned from research that followed the story of civic engagement and school reform in Philadelphia between 1995-2000.

1. School reform plans cannot be forged in a vacuum; local context has a huge impact!
2. Persuading civic leaders and citizens is not the same as engaging them in the development of reform plans.
3. In a highly politicized environment, a reform’s achievements are easily overlooked and soon forgotten.
4. Reform leaders need to provide principals, teachers, and parents with a sense of being valued and with real power to shape the reform.
5. When civic capacity to support school reform is weak and fragmented, increasing that capacity needs to be a priority.

Excerpted from RFA’s Policy Brief, 2002 and based on RFA’s evaluation of the Annenberg-supported *Children Achieving* reform initiative, conducted jointly with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE).

Methods

This investigation of civic engagement was done as a qualitative study in which we conducted dozens of interviews and observations between May 2003 and June 2005. In order to assess the nature and extent of public participation in Philadelphia's schools in the context of the state takeover, No Child Left Behind, and the increased use of outsourcing, we interviewed a sample of thirty-five local actors, selected using the criteria developed by Clarence Stone and his colleagues in their civic capacity research.⁸ Our interview subjects included education and program specialists; representatives of community, advocacy, and religious organizations; "general influentials" (leaders in city government, businesses, unions, universities, foundations, and think tanks), and members of the local media. Our core interview protocol asked interviewees to identify key players in the city and district, primary issues of concern, the workings of education networks, and decision-making processes in the city and district. For a subset of our interview subjects, we used a protocol focusing particularly on the politics of the current reform.

We supplemented these interviews with participant-observation at meetings of the School Reform Commission and several civic coalitions. We were also able to draw on interviews with central office staff and observations of district/private sector interactions conducted by members of the *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* research team who are analyzing district governance change. Together, this body of data enabled us to describe the dynamics around public participation in Philadelphia's school reform. We identified the ways different groups are affected by new institutional structures, charted the relationships among local actors and between these actors and the school district, and followed the civic community's response to various reform initiatives.

The landscape of school reform continues to change as we conduct this study. Having both a long history in Philadelphia and two years of interviews and observations has allowed us to understand the dynamics of the reform environment in Philadelphia and to recognize how important it is to continue to follow events, viewpoints, and outcomes as they unfold.

mayor. In April 2002, the SRC announced a diverse-provider plan, in which 45 low-performing schools would be managed by a collection of for-profit education management organizations, local universities, and non-profit organizations.¹⁰ In addition to this unprecedented number of schools under private management, the district has since established contracts for the management of disciplinary schools, technical assistance in support of high school transformation, curriculum, after-school programming, and a host of other services, demonstrating an increasing reliance on outside providers and a willingness to use outsourcing to accomplish its agenda.

In Philadelphia and across the country, the federal NCLB legislation is lending strength to the privatization movement. The legislation's inclusion of outsourcing and other forms of privatization as remedies for persistently failing schools

encourages policymakers to adopt those measures. In addition, NCLB's assumption that reform should happen quickly legitimates the turn towards market solutions. As Brady notes,¹¹ though privatization and other "strong" interventions are controversial and largely untested, NCLB's mandate of increasingly aggressive actions—and the expectation that widespread change will have occurred by the 2007-8 school year—may make them inevitable.¹¹

⁸Stone et al. (2001). op. cit.

¹⁰The Pennsylvania legislature had already approved the creation of charter schools, and in 2002 forty-five were operating in Philadelphia.

¹¹Brady (2003). op. cit.

Defining Civic Engagement

Americans have a long history of valuing civic engagement in educational decision-making, viewing public participation as necessary to the maintenance of a vibrant democracy.¹² In the nineteenth century, particularly in rural areas, each community operated its own school, a form of democratic localism that involved citizens in decision-making about curriculum, staffing, and school policies.¹³ The theme of citizen participation in decision-making continues to re-cycle in education discourse, attaining more or less prominence during particular historical periods. For example, in the late 1960s and early '70s, democratic localism resurfaced in the form of "community control," as urban activists across the country, frustrated by the poor performance of urban schools, argued that the centralized, professionalized, bureaucratic nature of urban school districts was harmful to minority students.

In the 1990s, the work of Clarence Stone and his colleagues affirmed the importance of public participation in education. In their study of 11 cities embarking on school reform efforts, they found that reform was more successful in cities with higher levels of "civic capacity"—in which representatives of a range of sectors in the community came together around a shared vision and plan for action.¹⁴

In a more general sense, recent scholars of civic engagement observe that a strong civil society, consisting of voluntary associations of all sorts, can serve as a key "check" on the power of government, enabling citizens to hold public institutions accountable and to shape their policies.¹⁵

¹²Katz, M. (1987). *Reconstructing American education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

McDonnell, L. (2000). Defining democratic purposes. In L. McDonnell, M. Timpane, & R. Benjamin (Eds.). *Rediscovering the democratic purposes of education*. Lawrenceville, KS: University Press of Kansas.

¹³Katz (1987). op. cit.

Tyack, D. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁴Stone et al. (2001). op. cit.

¹⁵Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone.

Skocpol, T. (1992). *Protecting soldiers and mothers: The political origins of social policy in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

How did Philadelphia get here?

1993

State freezes school funding formula.

1995

New Supt. Hornbeck begins Children Achieving Reform. Newly-elected, Republican, Gov. Ridge starts the first of three major (unsuccessful) pushes for school voucher programs.

1997

PA legislature approves statewide charter school legislation.

District, city, and community leaders file a lawsuit against the state contending that PA does not provide a "thorough and efficient" education.

1998

Hornbeck and city leaders "draw a line in the sand" and refuse to cut more programs-threatening to adopt an unbalanced budget.

District, city, and community leaders file a federal civil-rights suit against the state, arguing state's funding practices discriminate against school districts with large numbers of non-White students.

PA legislature responds by passing Act 46, a state takeover law aimed specifically at Philadelphia.

1999

School district presents budget to City Council with projected \$94 million deficit for 1999-2000 school year and refuses to make further cuts.

Heated mayoral race with education as a central issue.

2000

Mayor Street selects a new School Board and appoints the first Secretary of Education for the city.

PA Legislature passes and Gov. Ridge signs Act 16, the Education Empowerment Act, a state reform and "takeover" bill aimed at 11 school districts.

A state takeover is averted through a financial settlement reached between the School District and Gov. Ridge. Still facing a deficit, the School Board cuts the budget and Supt. Hornbeck resigns in protest.

2001

School Board adopts budget with \$216 million deficit, creating a new fiscal crisis with state takeover of the district possible.

Ridge hires Edison Schools, Inc for \$2.7 million to make recommendations for state takeover. Ongoing student and community protests against privatization of schools.

Ridge appointed Homeland Security Director, Lt. Gov. Schweiker becomes Gov.; presents takeover plan drawn heavily from Edison report calling for private management of up to 100 schools and recommends contracting out most central administration functions. Strong community opposition prompts the governor to negotiate a new plan.

State takeover becomes "friendly takeover" negotiated between Mayor Street and Gov. Schweiker, includes additional funds - \$75 million state and \$45 million city for the

SDP. City agrees to put on hold the federal civil rights suit against the state charging discrimination.

5-member SRC appointed to replace School Board (3 gubernatorial and 2 mayoral appointees). James Nevels, prominent suburban Philadelphia businessman appointed chair.

2002

No Child Left Behind is signed into law requiring states to define Annual Yearly Progress targets and increasingly severe interventions for failure to meet them.

Continued public opposition to extensive role of Edison in proposed reform.

SRC calls for an open process to select diverse providers and invites applications.

SRC chooses seven providers to manage 45 low-performing schools giving each provider \$450-\$850 additional funds per pupil, creating the diverse provider model.

Paul Vallas hired as the CEO. District creates Office of Restructured Schools (ORS) to manage 21 schools. Contracts with providers are finalized. Vallas reclaims responsibility for the oversight of central administration functions from Edison whom the SRC had named "lead provider."

With leadership from the local education fund, a cross city coalition, Education First Compact, is convened around education

Ed Rendell, Democrat and former Mayor of Philadelphia elected Gov.

22 schools meet all NCLB-mandated AYP targets.

2003

Vallas implements 2004 core curricula in math and literacy with increased instructional blocks. Terminates contract of one provider; 3 others get additional schools.

District creates Office of Development to serve as single point of contact for EMOs.

Rendell wages funding battle with PA legislature and delays budget passage.

58 schools meet all of their NCLB-mandated AYP targets

2004

160 schools meet all of their NCLB-mandated AYP targets (note: the state relaxed the criteria for meeting some AYP targets during 2003-04; 30 of the 160 schools would not have met all of their AYP targets in 2004 without these relaxed criteria).

Publication by SRC of Declaration of Education, a blueprint of district goals to be reached by 2008.

2005

District announces pairing 12 high schools with private "transition managers" to assist with their conversion into smaller schools.

District disbands Office of Restructured Schools and schools assigned to regions. SRC announces Edison receives 2 more schools. 11 schools failing to meet AYP for 6 years are assigned to the (newly created) Creative Action and Results (CAR) Region where they will get intensive intervention.

Recent scholars of civic engagement observe that a strong civil society, consisting of voluntary associations of all sorts, can serve as a key “check” on the power of government.

Similarly, others argue the importance to a functioning democracy of a vibrant public sphere—defined by Habermas as an arena separate from the state in which individuals come together to create, through reasoned discourse, a common understanding of society’s goals.¹⁶ While this literature assumes that dialogue about what constitutes a public good is embedded in practices of civic participation in public institutions, privatization of public functions can interfere with these dialogues. The entry of the private sector into the public arena can endanger citizens’ input into the larger purposes of the public institution by shrinking the domain for legitimate, collective decision-making and delimiting accountability to the terms of a contract, conditions that are particularly problematic for a field as complex as education.¹⁷

Our use of the term civic engagement is rooted in the American tradition of public participation in education. In defining *engagement*, we emphasize three inter-related dimensions of participation: setting the reform agenda, holding government and district officials accountable for system performance, and sustaining reforms through transitions in leadership. *Setting the agenda* implies that citizens help to decide what it is schools should be striving to achieve, joining with educators in identifying priorities and establishing goals. By *holding officials accountable*, we mean not only requiring that they report test scores or attach consequences to student performance, but also a more robust form of action, in which members of the public play a role in demanding and developing solutions to education-related problems and in holding political officials responsible for implementation and results. Involving citizens in agenda-setting and ensuring school accountability to the public take time and effort, since inevitably people will disagree as to what schools should be doing and

¹⁶Habermas, J. (2001). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Taylor, C. (1995). *Philosophical arguments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

See also, Calhoun, C. (Ed.). (1999). *Habermas and the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁷Hannaway, J. (1999). *Contracting as a mechanism for managing education services*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Leone, R.C. (2000). Forward in E. D. Sclar, *You don’t always get what you pay for: The economics of privatization* (pp. vii-ix). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

how. This ongoing engagement is necessary, however, to *sustaining reforms* and serves as an antidote to instability caused by the regular turnover of superintendents, principals, teachers, and elected officials.¹⁸

Our definition of *civic leaders* moves beyond traditional assumptions about influential urban constituencies, such as political and business leaders and the local civic elite, by incorporating grassroots and community organizations. As Stone argues in recent work, these groups represent low-income constituencies that are too often excluded from decision-making processes, even though their input is crucial to the development of equitable and sustainable reforms.¹⁹ In this paper, we focus particularly on groups that represent low-income constituencies and do not have the same kinds of access or power to influence decision-making as organizations representing higher status constituencies. Our definition of civic engagement does not favor a particular model of school governance. Rather, we argue that it is important to understand how governance affects civic engagement because broad based engagement serves as a way of creating both schools that are responsive to their constituencies and a citizenship that is invested in its schools.

In the 1980s and ‘90s a set of strategies emerged that were intended to expand the spaces for citizen involvement and increase educators’ accountability to local stakeholders. These included: a new interest in parent involvement and the emergence of local school councils, choice models, and civic coalitions focused on school reform. While each of these forms of citizen participation remains in existence to some extent in Philadelphia, current institutional arrangements are pushing to prominence another approach, which we call “participation through contracts.”

¹⁸Christman & Rhodes (2002). op. cit.

Gold & Simon (2004). op. cit.

Gold, E. & Simon, E. (with Brown, C.) (2002). *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform*. Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.

Mathews, D. (1996). *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation

Mediratta, K. & Fruchter N. (2003). *From governance to accountability: Building relationships that make schools work*. New York: New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy.

Stone et al. (2001). op. cit.

¹⁹Stone (2005, January). op. cit.

Stone (2005). op. cit.

Stone (n.d.). op. cit.

A Contracting Environment

In summer 2002, the SRC appointed Paul Vallas, the former Chicago school chief who was widely recognized as a dynamic leader in school reform, to be CEO of Philadelphia's schools. Vallas carried out the SRC's commitment to involving the private sector in school management and led the development of a new institutional infrastructure for engaging with public and private organizations. Early in his tenure, he created the Office of Development, which was charged with handling contracts with outside organizations, fostering an "entrepreneurial spirit" in the district and creating an environment conducive to the development of productive relationships with for- and non-profit groups.

The newly formed Office of Development has emerged as the key entry point for both individuals and organizations interested in engaging with the district, shaping both the ways these relationships develop and the goals being pursued. According to district administrators, the Office of Development staff, in conjunction with the district's legal department and under the scrutiny of the SRC, has developed a fairly detailed procedure that codifies relationships with external entities as "partnerships."²⁰ As one district administrator reported:

And one of the tools that really does [formalize the relationship] is that we first file a resolution, and the resolution is written highlighting exactly what the partnership and the scope of the partnership is to represent, and it seeks full approval through the School Reform Commission.... And once we receive approval from that entity, we take that resolution, it goes through our legal services and we turn that into a memorandum of understanding, and then through that process we refine the details and the scope of the project in a way, and we clearly commit and articulate the terms.... The second tool that's used to anchor the relationship is an evaluation process at the end of each year

of the project, before we amend it and bring the project back on for a second year.²¹

As a result, this administrator argued, district staff have a much clearer idea of the roles and responsibilities involved in each partnership and the expected outcomes for students and schools. In addition, the Office of Development has ensured that these partnerships are oriented around goals identified by the district:

...and that's the beauty of what these partnerships represent now, because I feel that many of [the partners] are coming to the table with a real earnest interest in working in the best interest of supporting key identified goals... *and not with their own objectives, and their own goals and their own agenda.*²² [emphasis added]

Within the Office of Development, this change is viewed positively, because of the potential for focusing and coordinating all activities and avoiding the sort of replication of services that so often plagues urban school systems.

District officials note that the current partnership process represents a major shift from the previous approach to external relationships, in which representatives from groups or organizations interested in working with schools would often contact principals or teachers directly and establish informal relationships. As one administrator explained, "we've tried to centralize [relationships with external groups] in a sense where anything over \$600, notify the Development Office and then we'll let you know if it's okay."²³ Organizations in Philadelphia are aware of the district's new process and structure their own efforts with respect to the district accordingly. Many groups now eschew the less formal relationships of the previous era for publicly recognized "partnerships" codified by specific written agreements.²⁴

Many groups now eschew the less formal relationships of the previous era for publicly recognized "partnerships" codified by specific written agreements.

²⁰We note that the language of "partnerships" has been used widely and loosely in educational reform to connote relationships that are informal as well as those regulated by contracts. Examples would include "school-family partnerships," "business partnerships," "community partnerships," etc.

²¹Interview, district administrator, August 2004.

²²Interview, district administrator, August 2004.

²³Interview, district administrator, October 2004.

²⁴Interview, district administrator, August 2004.

Assessing the New Landscape for Engagement in Philadelphia's Schools

These partnerships, particularly with business, political, and civic leaders, have brought important new resources to the district and new players to the table.

There is no question that the newly reconfigured school district has reached out to individuals and groups in Philadelphia. The outsourcing of services, as well as other district initiatives, has enabled the district to create relationships with a range of groups, including businesses, the local education fund, universities, community groups, foundations, city programs, faith-based groups and local cultural institutions. One administrator referred laughingly to the number of partnerships the district has developed: "...it is so mammoth, so I think we work with everyone as far as non-profits are concerned... but yes, I mean we are trying to reach out to corporations and foundations that we haven't worked with..."²⁵ These partnerships, particularly with business, political, and civic leaders, have brought important new resources to the district and new players to the table.

This emphasis on building external relationships has had several positive consequences. It has enabled the school district to accomplish a great deal during a relatively short period of time. Vallas himself has emphasized the utility of partnerships in speeding the pace of reform:

Partnerships help address leadership gaps.... The key struggle is leadership. Who will manage the process of schools converted to high schools? ... We can't wait five to ten years.... We need to institutionalize change now....²⁶

According to district officials, the newly elaborated partnership process also makes it "easier" for groups to engage with the district, shows that the district is taking its relationships with external entities more seriously, aligns the programs with the district, and holds them all to the same standards.²⁷

The belief that the district's growing number of partnerships represents a positive development is by no means confined to district administrators.

Other civic leaders also identify the number of partnerships as evidence that the district is being proactive in addressing pressing issues. A civic leader's comments early in our study reflect those of a number we interviewed subsequently: "if Paul Vallas calls you, you get the feeling that good things could happen."²⁸ These partnerships alter the district's image from operating in isolation to working in conjunction with the broader community.

While many in the civic community respond positively to the district's growing web of relationships, the process of developing and approving contracts has been largely hidden from public view. The public plays no role in choosing which firms or organizations will receive contracts, and, because conversations about these contracts take place almost entirely outside of public view, has little understanding of the rationale behind particular choices. For example, Philadelphians had no input into the district's recent choice of certain private companies to serve as "transition managers" for the development of new high schools.²⁹ Though ostensibly forums for public engagement, SRC meetings offer minimal opportunity for participation. Not only is conversation among the commissioners themselves brief, but the procedures for "public comment" at these meetings are quite restrictive: comments are kept to a strict time limit, and dialogue between commissioners and speakers is discouraged.

The evolving system of "partnerships" and contracts carries with it additional consequences for civic participation. It has the potential to negatively impact the ability of grassroots and community groups to engage in agenda-setting and to hold the district accountable for its performance in serving those who historically have been most disadvantaged. These traditionally independent "voices" might well be tamped down as they become incorporated into the district's agenda and the services they offer are shaped by the obligations of a contractual relationship. A further influence on these groups is the growing reality that their futures are contingent on their ability to

²⁵Interview, district administrator, October 2004.

²⁶Researcher's fieldnotes from the Innovations in Education Conference, October 2004.

²⁷Interviews, district administrators, August 2004 & December 2003.

²⁸Interview, "general influential," October 2003.

²⁹Useem, E. (2005). Learning from Philadelphia's school reform: *What do the research findings show so far?* Philadelphia: Research for Action.

negotiate contracts for their services and operate effectively within a market system.³⁰ Beyond these influences, the rapid pace of reform may inhibit thoughtful, critical citizen engagement.

Grassroots Organizations and Participation through Contracts

In the current reform landscape, community and grassroots organizations play multiple roles, and many struggle to position themselves effectively with respect to the district. Some groups have developed contractual relationships to provide services to the district, while others strive to influence the schools through organizing and advocacy or through participation in district-led initiatives, such as the Campaign for Human Capital and the Parent Leadership Academies. It appears that the decision to accept contracts is a defining factor in an organization's relationship with the district, because—at least for grassroots and community groups—“participation through contracts” can have several problematic consequences.

Essentially, we have found that once groups (or individuals) have accepted a contract with the district to provide a service, they are, to an extent that varies from case to case, tied financially to the school district. As a result, their ability to set their own agenda around education—and to influence the district's—is constrained, accountability can be limited to contractual terms, and “partners” can have a more difficult time expressing criticism of district initiatives. Because these organizations often represent low-income constituencies and are important voices for equity in the district, the extent to which their autonomy is compromised may pose a challenge to the development of civic capacity around Philadelphia's school reform.

Our analysis of interview data probing for relationships and networks between and among local groups indicates that grassroots and community organizations are largely allied with other similar

groups and have little exchange with universities, businesses, cultural institutions, and other civic elites. As a result, these organizations, already fiscally stretched in many cases, are disconnected from the more powerful sectors of the civic community. Because higher-status organizations have much to offer the district in terms of resources and legitimacy, they may be able to accept contracts from the district without sacrificing their ability to exert pressure when and where they see fit. For grassroots and community groups, who have little in terms of material resources to offer the district (and, hence, fewer forms of leverage) besides the services outlined in their contracts, it appears that the contractual relationship and their consequent fiscal relationship with the bureaucracy may be narrowing and channeling their input.

Our first example comes from the district's effort to establish new after-school programs for students who performed poorly on standardized tests. The creation of these new programs set off alarm bells among community groups, advocacy organizations, and churches, because they would channel students away from their programs and/or displace community curricula. When representatives from a number of organizations met with Vallas to explain their concerns, he responded by offering them contracts to run after-school programs for the district. Observing that the current administration is “all about standardizing academics across the city,” an administrator explained that, in the process of creating an elaborate set of partnerships, the district developed standards for after-school programming:

...these standards really help to create a line. They allow us to say that all of our youth programs should be doing this.... I have suggested... that we say to the providers that regardless of what they put in front of us, we are following these core standards for youth development programs that we'd like you to follow too.³¹

Thus, by developing contracts with community groups to operate after-school services, the district was able to exert pressure on these groups to align their programs with district priorities.

For grassroots and community groups, it appears that the contractual relationship and their consequent fiscal relationship with the district is narrowing and channeling their input.

³⁰For a full discussion of the trajectory of non-profits during the 1980s and '90s including the trend toward their commercialization within the service sector, and its potential impacts, see Katz, M (2001). *The independent sector, the market, and the state. In The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American welfare state.* New York: Henry Holt and Company.

See also Salamon, L. M. (1993, March). The marketization of welfare: Changing nonprofit and for-profit roles in the American welfare state. *Social Service Review*, 67, 16-39.

³¹Interview, district administrator, December 2003.

Community groups responded differently to this new sort of relationship. The employee of one organization that had long administered a range of youth programs independent from the district expressed frustration at the district's emphasis on raising test scores:

There's been a lot of pressure on us to change the structure of our programs to make them more academic to help push test scores up. We [feel] we already have a model that we work with and it works for us and our goals...³²

This employee objected to the district's goal of changing both the purpose and structure of her programs. In contrast, the pastor of a local church that has also run an after-school program felt much more positively about the district's handling of the after-school issue, calling it "brilliant" and noting that "the community is definitely involved in what's going on, and so we're made to not just criticize but get involved."³³ While the "contracting out" of after-school programs has been met with mixed reviews, it is clear that the organizations involved have become incorporated into the district's structure and agenda—and are economic beneficiaries of the district—in a way that they were not in the past.

In other cases, the contracting involves individuals from the grassroots sector rather than organizations. One local parent activist observed that the district has hired a number of parents to do work they were already doing as volunteers—changing their status from grassroots actors to district employees. In the process, these civic actors lost their independent status, became financially bound to the district, and were subject to district control. This activist commented that at least one district hire was told she could no longer perform her advocacy work because of a "conflict of interest" between her role as an advocate and her new role as a district employee.³⁴ In one of our early interviews, the director of a service organization noted that when the district hires com-

munity leaders, community activists become much more careful about criticizing district policies.

But [Vallas has] been so effective at hiring people that we respect so everyone has been very polite about how we in the Latino community attack the district. We don't want to hurt people that we respect and have a long history with, like [local leader now working for district].... How would you attack the district when she's in such a high position there because when I attack the district I'm also attacking someone I respect?³⁵

In the process, Latino activists accepted a major change—and an apparent setback—with minimal protest: "But while [the hiring] was happening, the bilingual office got dismantled...in the old days the district would have been packed with protests and letter writers. I don't know what happened..."³⁶ Thus, not only does this process remove from the non-profit/advocacy sector individuals who have important skills and relationships, it may also erode capacity within that sector for critique of the district and demands for accountability.

During the state takeover, grassroots and community groups were vocal opponents of privatization and were at least partly responsible for the eventual scaling back of the scope of privatization from the governor's initial proposal. In contrast, more recent educational initiatives with potentially controversial outcomes have generated a surprising lack of discussion. Describing a new partnership between local businesses and the schools in Center City (Philadelphia's revitalized, downtown area), one local educator, concerned about the implications for equity, mused, "I don't know how it has gotten this far. But, like I told you, now everybody works for the district, so there is no outcry"³⁷ Our evidence indicates that participation through contracts makes it difficult for some groups, especially small grassroots and advocacy organizations, to perform their traditional role as activists and critics, even while it offers employment to depressed

³²Interview, community organization representative, June 2003.

³³Interview, religious organization representative, December 2003.

³⁴Interview, advocacy organization representative, August 2003.

³⁵Interview, advocacy organization representative, December 2003.

³⁶Interview, advocacy organization representative, December 2003.

³⁷Interview, district administrator, June 2005.

communities and resources to financially strapped organizations. The result may be something of a tradeoff: wide-ranging dialogue and critique exchanged for civic peace and resources for grassroots organizations.

The Pace of Reform

Since the state takeover, several forces have come together to move reform at a dizzying pace. First, the rejection of the status quo symbolized by the takeover and by the imperatives of NCLB promotes an expectation that reform be swift and comprehensive. Second, the school district's use of outsourcing—with both for- and non-profit organizations—has facilitated the fast roll-out of a host of reforms and new programs. Finally, Vallas' own leadership style, with its mix of energy and pragmatism, has resulted in rapid change. Innovations to date include a core curriculum, benchmark tests, mandatory after-school and summer programs for low-achieving students, a major capital campaign, new teacher recruitment policies, and new disciplinary schools and programs. As one observer exclaimed after the first year of Vallas' tenure, "It is change, change, change!"³⁸

The school district's rapid pace of reform—though welcomed by many Philadelphians—has also become an obstacle to civic engagement. As one education activist noted, referring to the district, "you're doing 35 things at the same time, you don't get as much skeptical criticism."³⁹ This activist observed that the local media has been similarly affected: "You know, we've talked with reporters and we've said, 'why aren't you asking critical questions?' and they've said, 'I've gotta cover five things at the same time!'"⁴⁰ Other civic leaders commented that Vallas' focus on accomplishing his agenda as quickly as possible leaves little time for authentic community reflection and/or involvement. For example, referring to the plan to build new high schools in the city, one long-time observer of the district noted, "They think they did community input when they had two meetings about the high school movement. They said, 'okay, we've done community engagement, so let's move on.' It

doesn't work that way."⁴¹ Indeed, the district has moved rapidly with its plans to transform the city's high schools, assisted by contracts with several private organizations to orchestrate the transition. Thus, Philadelphia's reform environment is characterized by yet another trade-off: the need for immediate, visible change has displaced an interest in sustained, intensive engagement.

Conclusion

In the years following the state takeover of Philadelphia's schools and the passage of NCLB, the district's reliance on outsourcing and the corresponding structuring of relationships around contracts have begun to reshape civic participation. While this new organizational structure may have positive effects, it also carries with it additional, potentially troubling consequences. A return to our definition of civic engagement as participation of elite *and* grassroots entities in setting agendas, holding officials accountable, and developing sustainable reforms helps make these consequences more clear.

The Office of Development's approach to partnerships has generated important resources for Philadelphia's schools. However, the partnerships' parameters—which support the district's agenda rather than solicit or integrate alternative perspectives—may hamper the ability of Philadelphians to articulate a vision for the city's schools and impact policy. This appears to be especially true for the many small grassroots and community organizations that historically have been independent organizations deriving their strength from citizen mobilization. In addition, while the process of developing formal contracts is largely an effort to enhance accountability by outlining exactly what individuals and groups will do, it also represents a shift in the locus and meaning of accountability. First, accountability is embedded at the district level rather than at the local level. Second, the responsibility to adhere to the terms of the contract replaces accountability to parents and community.

The literature on civic capacity in school reform has shown that the quality and sustainability of reform is a function of the inclusiveness of

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³⁸Interview, "general influential," June 2003.

³⁹Interview, advocacy organization representative, May 2005.

⁴⁰Interview, advocacy organization representative, May 2005.

⁴¹Interview, education specialist, May 2003.

engagement.⁴² In other words, the groups “at the table” must represent a wide range of constituencies, including the least advantaged students and their families in order to produce results that are equitable and long term. Importantly, these groups must participate as decision-makers, not just as service-providers or reform beneficiaries. Grassroots organizations are critical to the development of sustainable, equitable school reform in urban areas.⁴³ Our findings about the ways recent changes may constrict the engagement of grassroots organizations could have worrisome implications for the quality of school reform in Philadelphia. If the sector that represents low-income and minority constituencies is less able to participate in agenda-setting and to hold educators accountable for their performance, then will the community be able to invest in and sustain reform that meets the needs of its most disadvantaged students?

Our findings about the ways recent changes may constrict the engagement of grassroots organizations could have worrisome implications for the quality of school reform in Philadelphia.

In addition, there are serious consequences for civic engagement generated by the sense of crisis and the expectation of rapid change that permeates post-takeover, post-NCLB Philadelphia. According to one longtime education advocate,

In the original rhetoric of the takeover and Vallas’ hiring, there was an emphasis on ‘rescue’—something and someone was needed to ‘save’ Philadelphia’s schools. This rhetoric and mindset continues, which is problematic for accountability: when you are being rescued, you don’t get a say in how you want to be rescued.⁴⁴

The process of “rescuing” Philadelphia’s schools has involved dramatic and wide-ranging reform. The result has been a reform pace that makes it difficult for local civic actors to reflect upon, and engage with, district initia-

⁴²Stone et al. (2001). op. cit.
Stone (2005, January). op. cit.
Stone (2005). op. cit.

⁴³Gold & Simon, with Brown (2002). op. cit.
Mediratta, K & Fruchter N. (2002). *Organizing for school reform: How communities are finding their voice and reclaiming their public schools*. New York: New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy.
Stone (2005) op. cit.
Stone (n.d.). op. cit.

⁴⁴Researcher’s fieldnotes from an education coalition meeting, May 2005.

tives—again, raising concerns about reform quality, sustainability and accountability.

As we have argued, the emerging institutional structure for civic engagement with public schools carries with it trade-offs, at once generating resources and a greater sense of investment in the schools and complicating citizens’ ability to impact the district’s agenda. Similarly, the sense of urgency has led to an exchange of sustained dialogue for speedy implementation. These trade-offs have different import at different stages in the reform process. At the early stages, decisions may need to be made quickly in order to jump start change and build confidence in the system. The need for momentum may preclude more time-consuming, inclusive processes. However, as the district moves from a perceived state of crisis to a consideration of long-term change, the need for a deliberative, broad-based process becomes clearer. One of the strengths of the current administration is its ability to involve a wide range of Philadelphia individuals and organizations in the process of implementing reform. Whether or not this sort of involvement will eventually lead to greater participation in agenda-setting remains to be seen.

In this brief, we have attempted to describe the current arrangements for public participation in Philadelphia schools and to raise some preliminary concerns. Many questions remain, which we plan to pursue in future research:

- To what extent are groups able to pursue their original agendas once they have engaged in contractual relationships with the district?
- Does participation in the process of implementing reform enable organizations to develop expanded networks and enhanced influence over the educational agenda in the city?
- How do groups not in contractual relationships engage with the district?
- How does the hiring of community leaders affect their participation in advocacy efforts over the longer term?
- To what extent do the practices of contracting with external organiza-

tions and hiring community leaders endure despite changes in school district leadership?

- As the district moves out of “crisis mode,” how will citizens play a role in directing its long-term agenda?
- What mechanisms are there for building civic capacity around school reform and, especially, to ensure equity for the students, families, and communities who have not been well served by public education?

As privatization under NCLB proceeds, and districts across the country experiment with various forms of public-private hybrids, it is imperative to examine not just the effectiveness of this model for delivering particular services but also its implications for civic engagement in public education.

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